

Student Politics and Its Impacts on Political Culture in Bangladesh A Study of Recent Trends

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Abstract

Student politics has long been an integral part of Bangladesh's political landscape, profoundly shaping the nation's political culture. This paper investigates the role of student politics in shaping the political culture of Bangladesh, focusing on recent trends. Historically, student movements have been powerful catalysts for socio-political change, from the Language Movement of 1952 to the Liberation War of 1971. However, the contemporary landscape of student politics has shifted towards partisanship and career-driven motives, often fostering campus violence and undermining democratic values. Using a qualitative methodology, including a review of literature and data analysis from secondary sources, this study aims to analyze the interplay between student politics and political culture. The findings reveal student politics' constructive and destructive impacts on Bangladesh's socio-political framework. The study concludes with recommendations for reform to realign student politics with its democratic potential.

Keywords: Student politics, Bangladesh, political culture, partisanship, campus violence, democracy.

Abstrak

Politik mahasiswa telah lama menjadi bagian integral dari lanskap politik Bangladesh, yang secara mendalam membentuk budaya politik negara tersebut. Makalah ini menyelidiki peran politik mahasiswa dalam membentuk budaya politik Bangladesh, dengan fokus pada tren terkini. Secara historis, gerakan mahasiswa telah menjadi katalisator yang kuat bagi perubahan sosial-politik, dari Gerakan Bahasa tahun 1952 hingga Perang Pembebasan tahun 1971. Namun, lanskap politik mahasiswa kontemporer telah bergeser ke arah partisanisme dan motif yang berorientasi pada karier, yang sering kali mendorong kekerasan di kampus dan merusak nilai-nilai demokrasi. Dengan menggunakan metodologi kualitatif, termasuk tinjauan pustaka dan analisis data dari sumber-sumber sekunder, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis interaksi antara politik mahasiswa dan budaya politik. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkap dampak konstruktif dan destruktif politik mahasiswa terhadap kerangka sosial-politik Bangladesh. Penelitian ini diakhiri dengan rekomendasi untuk reformasi guna menyelaraskan kembali politik mahasiswa dengan potensi demokrasinya.

Kata kunci: Politik mahasiswa, Bangladesh, budaya politik, partisanisme, kekerasan di kampus, demokrasi.

BACKGROUND

The political situation in Bangladesh is partly influenced by India's involvement (Nandy, 2019). Student politics in Bangladesh holds a unique position in the country's socio-political history. From the colonial period to post-independence, students have been pivotal in opposing authoritarianism and championing democratic values (Ahmed, 2020). The Language Movement of 1952 is one of the earliest instances where student activism directly influenced national identity, culminating in the recognition of Bengali as a state language. Similarly, students played a crucial role in the mass movements of 1969 and the Liberation War of 1971, demonstrating their capacity to drive significant political transformations (Jahan, 2017). Post-independence, student politics became increasingly intertwined with national political

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parties. Organizations like the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) serve as the student wings of the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, respectively. This affiliation often leads to partisan divides within university campuses, shifting the focus from social activism to political patronage (Rahman, 2021). While these organizations retain the capacity to mobilize large-scale movements, such as the road safety protests of 2018, they are also associated with rising incidents of campus violence and corruption. This paper seeks to explore how student politics, with its historical legacy and evolving dynamics, shapes the political culture of Bangladesh. Drawing on recent literature and case studies, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the positive and negative influences of student politics, offering actionable recommendations for future reforms.

This study holds significance in understanding the evolving role of student politics in Bangladesh's political landscape. With a historical legacy rooted in activism, student politics continues to influence national discourses, both positively and negatively (Khan, 2018). By critically analyzing recent trends, the study contributes to broader discussions on democratic governance, youth engagement, and policy reforms. It also highlights the challenges of partisanship and campus violence, offering practical insights for stakeholders to mitigate these issues.

The historical trajectory of student politics in Bangladesh:

Student politics in Bangladesh has a rich and dynamic history, closely intertwined with the nation's struggle for independence and the subsequent evolution of its political landscape. The trajectory of student activism in Bangladesh can be broadly divided into four phases: the pre-independence period, the Liberation War, the post-independence period, and the modern era.

Pre-Independence Period:

Student politics in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) gained significant momentum in the early 20th century. The most prominent moment came on February 21, 1952, during the Language Movement, when students in Dhaka protested against the Pakistani government's decision to impose Urdu as the sole official language, sidelining Bengali. The students' demand for the recognition of Bengali led to the deaths of several students and sparked a widespread movement that contributed to the formation of the linguistic and cultural identity of Bangladesh (Hossain, 2011). The event remains commemorated as International Mother Language Day.

Liberation War and Student Involvement:

Student politics reached new heights during the 1971 Liberation War when students played a pivotal role in the struggle for independence. Many student leaders, such as Sheikh Hasina, Begum Khaleda Zia, and other prominent figures, were involved in organizing mass movements. The political stance of the students in favor of Bangladesh's sovereignty and freedom fueled the resistance against Pakistani forces. This period highlighted the mobilizing power of students and their role in shaping national policies (Sen, 2002).

Post-Independence:

In the years following independence in 1971, student politics continued to be a key player in the political discourse of Bangladesh. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, student organizations like the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Islami Chhatra Shibir exerted influence on the political arena.

Student unions became influential arms of the two primary political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The tension between these organizations often manifested in violent clashes (Riaz, 2009). The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led government replicated the same approach after winning the 1991 and 2002 parliamentary elections (Nandy, et al., 2024).

In recent decades, student politics in Bangladesh has been marked by fierce partisan competition and at times, violent protests. The relationship between student organizations and political parties has deepened, with student organizations often seen as staging grounds for political recruitment. Both the Awami League and BNP leverage student movements for political gain, while incidents like the 2013 Shahbagh Movement and 2018 student protests against unsafe roads highlight a more general trend of activism among students seeking political, social, and economic change. The trajectory of student politics in Bangladesh reflects not only national political shifts but also the collective memory of students' vital role in shaping the nation's political consciousness and history. Historically the involvement of students in politics and the issue of human security students in Bangladesh always play an active role (Nandy and Majee 2022).

Recent trends and their influence on political culture:

Recent trends in student politics in Bangladesh have had a profound influence on the nation's political culture, shifting the dynamics of both electoral and non-electoral political engagement. These trends, driven by social media, the rise of youth-centric activism, and the growing involvement of student organizations in national politics, have reshaped political ideologies and protest strategies, giving rise to new forms of political participation among youth.

Social Media and Youth Mobilization:

The proliferation of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube has radically changed the nature of student politics in Bangladesh. Younger generations, equipped with smartphones, are now more active in voicing political opinions, organizing protests, and mobilizing for causes that transcend traditional political boundaries. Social media enables rapid, widespread dissemination of information, making it easier to organize political protests, as demonstrated in the student-led Shahbagh Movement in 2013, which demanded capital punishment for war criminals (Hossain, 2019). Social media thus plays a dual role: empowering youth while also increasing political polarization and the capacity for organized mobilization in a society historically marred by factional divides. The use of hashtags like Justice for Our Students and Safe Roads in recent protests reveals a shift in how young people express political discontent. They are not only rallying around party affiliations but also responding to socio-economic issues, which has led to a diversification of political discourse (Hasan & Rasool, 2020). The constant digital connectivity gives students the tools to form activist collectives that are often disconnected from traditional political parties, fostering a new wave of student activism not directly tied to established institutions.

Youth-Centric Activism and Intersectional Issues:

A major shift in recent years has been the broadening of the issues around which student movements are centered. Traditionally, student politics in Bangladesh has revolved around partisan rivalry, often aligning with the Awami League or BNP. However, recent movements, such as the protests in 2018 triggered by the deaths of two students in road accidents, highlight a generational change toward activism focused on national issues, such as public safety and economic inequality, beyond partisan politics

(Abdullah & Islam, 2018). This trend signals an increasing dissatisfaction with traditional political structures and the growing demand for accountability and reform. These protests demonstrated that students are increasingly fighting against systemic problems rather than simply defending political elites. In 2018, tens of thousands of students took to the streets, urging reforms in the education sector and demanding safer roads and a halt to corruption in government institutions (Ahmed, 2019). This “apolitical” style of activism is an attempt to distance itself from the polarized political environment and challenge a status quo that many youths perceive as corrupt.

Political Culture and Student Organizations:

The influence of student organizations, particularly those aligned with the two major political parties — the Awami League’s Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and BNP’s Islami Chhatra Shibir — remains strong, though this influence has become more controversial. These organizations have historically been tools for mobilizing political support, engaging in often violent rivalries, and strengthening party structures (Riaz, 2009). However, recent trends suggest a growing dissatisfaction with the unchecked power of these groups. Student leaders affiliated with mainstream parties now face increasing scrutiny from their peers, who prefer grassroots activism over traditional hierarchical politics (Islam, 2020). Political culture is changing as many students question the long-standing dominance of these two major political parties and their proxies in student organizations. Some movements are calling for depoliticization of campuses, arguing that academic institutions should prioritize intellectual growth over political allegiance. Nonetheless, the direct involvement of these student organizations in political movements remains integral to Bangladesh’s electoral politics.

Recent trends in student politics in Bangladesh show a paradigm shift from traditional party-affiliated activism to more issue-based, youth-driven movements. With the use of social media to organize and advocate, students are shifting the focus of their activism from narrowly partisan concerns to larger, more inclusive socio-political issues that reflect the aspirations of a newer generation. While partisan student organizations remain powerful, the increasing popularity of grassroots activism and the rise of independent student voices are reshaping political culture, challenging long-standing political traditions, and ultimately influencing Bangladesh’s evolving political discourse.

The positive and negative impacts of student politics:

Student politics in Bangladesh has had both positive and negative impacts on the political landscape, society, and the students themselves. While it has played a central role in shaping national politics and encouraging political participation, it has also contributed to violence, factionalism, and the politicization of educational spaces.

Positive Impacts of Student Politics

Encouragement of Political Awareness and Participation: Student politics has played a significant role in fostering political awareness among the youth of Bangladesh. By engaging with local and national issues, student leaders help in mobilizing their peers to actively participate in politics. As seen in historical movements such as the 1952 Language Movement and the 1971 Liberation War, student organizations have been at the forefront of national protests and uprisings, contributing to the formulation of national political discourses (Hossain, 2011). In contemporary times, student-led movements on issues such as road safety and educational reforms also demonstrate their continuing role in social change (Ahmed, 2019).

Development of Leadership Skills: Participating in student politics provides young individuals with the opportunity to develop leadership, organizational, and communication skills. These experiences can shape future political leaders and activists who have a deep understanding of governance, grassroots mobilization, and public policy (Hossain, 2019). Many of Bangladesh's political figures, including past prime ministers like Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, emerged from student politics, reflecting the development of leadership skills in these settings (Sen, 2002).

Promotion of Social Issues and Reform: Student politics is a significant channel for advocating for reforms in areas like education, healthcare, and social justice. The youth often demand that political and social reforms be made, and these demands can lead to tangible change. For instance, recent student protests in Bangladesh have focused on addressing inequality, and corruption, and improving road safety. These movements have pushed the government to make significant policy changes or reconsider current practices (Abdullah & Islam, 2018).

Negative Impacts of Student Politics

Violence and Campus Unrest: One of the most troubling aspects of student politics in Bangladesh is the prevalence of violence, particularly between students affiliated with rival political parties. Student organizations, particularly those aligned with the Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are often involved in violent confrontations on campuses (Riaz, 2009). These rivalries contribute to a culture of fear and tension within universities, deterring academic progress and eroding the integrity of educational spaces. The violence can also lead to tragic incidents and fatalities, undermining the moral authority of student politics.

Polarization and Partisan Divisions: Student politics in Bangladesh has become heavily partisan, with student organizations firmly aligned with the country's two major political parties: the Awami League and BNP. These alignments often create polarized environments where ideological differences stifle open debate and consensus. The politicization of campuses has led to a situation where academic discussions are influenced or interrupted by political agendas (Islam, 2020). The intense loyalty to political parties sometimes overrides the focus on education, compromising the intellectual development of students.

Disruption of Educational Environments: The dominance of political parties in student organizations frequently results in the prioritization of political activities over academic pursuits. Protest movements, strikes, and the closure of campuses for political reasons disrupt educational schedules and affect students' academic performance. The focus on partisan politics in educational spaces detracts from the primary objective of universities—academic learning and research (Ahmed, 2019). Moreover, student leaders often divert attention from critical academic concerns by focusing on political rivalries, creating a contentious campus atmosphere.

Corruption and Nepotism: The prominence of student organizations in political life can also promote corruption and nepotism. Many student leaders, with their political ties, are given undue advantages in university administrations, access to resources, or opportunities within the government. This undermines fairness and merit-based opportunities in education, creating an atmosphere where politics, rather than academic achievement, often determines the student's success (Hasan & Rasool, 2020).

Student politics in Bangladesh, while offering opportunities for political engagement, leadership development, and social change, also has its darker sides, including violence, partisan division, and academic disruption. The positive impacts, such as encouraging political participation and activism, promoting social reform, and developing leadership skills, demonstrate its vital role in democratic

processes. However, the negative impacts—violence, polarization, and the disruption of academic institutions—pose significant challenges to the integrity of educational environments and the personal well-being of students. For student politics to have a lasting positive effect, there must be reforms that address these negative aspects while maintaining its potential for fostering civic engagement and leadership.

Discussion

Historical Role Student politics has been instrumental in shaping key national movements, from the Language Movement to the Liberation War. **Recent Trends** Recent trends show increasing partisanship, campus violence, and a decline in ideological commitment among student leaders. **Impacts on Political Culture** Positive impacts include mobilizing protests and raising public awareness. Negative impacts involve perpetuating political patronage and undermining democratic values. The historical significance of student politics in Bangladesh underscores its potential to act as a force for socio-political change. However, recent trends reveal a troubling shift towards partisanship, fostering a culture of dependency on mainstream political parties (Ahmed, 2020). The patron-client relationships within student organizations mirror the political culture of national parties, often perpetuating corruption and nepotism (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2022). The criminal activities of the political leaders of Bangladesh through illegal money laundering are a national grievance. The misuse of public funds and high-level corruption by the political leaders of Bangladesh led to the anti-governmental movement (Nandy, and Mamun, 2024).

Despite these challenges, student organizations continue to demonstrate their ability to mobilize and influence public discourse. The 2018 road safety protests highlighted the enduring relevance of student activism in addressing pressing societal issues (The Daily Star, 2018). Digital platforms have further empowered students, enabling more inclusive and efficient mobilization (Alam, 2020). Addressing the negative aspects of student politics requires systemic reforms, including restoring autonomy to student bodies and promoting non-partisan engagement. Universities must also prioritize democratic practices within student organizations to nurture future leaders committed to ethical governance (Hasan, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The present trends of political shifts and people unrest from the middle of July 2024 the reflection of the global social movement with multiple factors where students got involved (Nandy, 2024 a). However, the motives of the students were not only based on the anti-quota movement but also focused on religious radicalism. Student politics has evolved significantly over the years, transitioning from idealistic student-driven movements to partisanship-driven organizations that often exert power both on campus and in the national political arena. The increasing involvement of student organizations with political parties has contributed to both the vitality and the volatility of Bangladesh's political culture. While the activism seen in student politics represents a democratic engagement, it also poses a threat to the nation's intellectual integrity and fosters political violence and instability. Future reforms are necessary to allow space for student-led advocacy that emphasizes merit, equality, and democratic values. This would help foster a political culture grounded in dialogue, cooperation, and the constructive exchange of ideas rather than one dominated by the demands of party politics.

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